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## Article

## Liquid London: Sporting Spectacle, Britishness and Ban-optic Surveillance

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### Abstract

Under the rubrics of recent ‘terror’ attacks—especially 9/11 and 7/7—the discourses of security and surveillance, and the subsequent heightened awareness of risk and insecurity, have been framed within an increasingly global context. Through an appropriation of the ban-opticon *dispositif* (Bigo 2006, 2011), this article analyses the changing urban transformations of civic space and mediated messages perpetuated within, and through, the London 2012 Olympic Games. In so doing, we deconstruct the spatial and commercial (re)fashioning of London 2012 and key messages delivered throughout the opening ceremony via a post-panoptic lens, to identify how processes of both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ social control are reiterated and (re)configured through the establishment of a clearly delineated ‘other’, that which is deemed ‘unwelcome’ and situated as posing a threat to the safety of the normalised and accepted majority. Thus, through a reading of the cultural politics of class, race and gender that are embedded within sporting spectacle, we argue that London 2012 capitalised on an institutionalised culture of fear to convey, and thus contain, an accepted vision of multiculturalism, while legitimising surveillance practices and security measures that became ingrained within the urban landscape and social fabric of the nation’s capital. In so doing, we point towards a troubling yet all too tangible true London Olympic legacy, one that identifies and subjects specific yet significant ‘others’ to problematic forms of social control and corporeal governance.

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### Introduction

A growing body of literature has sought to examine the relationships between global sporting mega-events, terrorism, and the shifting trends associated with securitisation and surveillance practises (e.g. Atkinson and Young 2012; Boyle and Haggerty 2009, 2011; Coaffee 2012; Fussey et al. 2011; Houlihan and Guilianotti 2012; Giulianotti and Klauser 2012; Lindsay 2013; Palmer 2013; Sugden 2012; Toohey and Taylor 2012). Within these debates, emphasis has been placed upon the *use* of global sporting mega-events as a stage to both deploy and develop enhanced surveillance technologies, and provide a platform in which to implement wider security strategies in major cities located around the globe (Boyle and Haggerty 2009; MacDonald and Hunter 2013; Silk 2012; Taylor and Toohey 2011). The hosting of the Summer Olympics in Athens 2004, Beijing 2008 and London 2012 demonstrated the heightened consideration surrounding the discourse of security and the accelerated intensification of militarisation that surrounded the Games (Coaffee et al. 2011; Samatas 2011; Schimmel 2012). Since the terrorist activity of September 11, 2001 (9/11), and the subsequent bombings of the London transportation system occurring four years later (7/7),<sup>1</sup> the discourse surrounding security and modes of social control has

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<sup>1</sup> The day following the announcement that London had been awarded the Games (met with huge celebrations in Trafalgar Square), a series of coordinated suicide bombs were detonated on London’s transport system. Killing 52 and injuring 700, the bombings gave weight to ongoing reassessments of ‘Britishness’ placing renewed emphasis on

become firmly situated within a global context. In the wake of these terror attacks and the military invasion of Afghanistan, we have come to witness a shift in attitude towards managing the ‘war on terror’ with an increasing propensity to predict ‘when’ terror strikes may occur and thus alleviate their impact, as opposed to previous considerations that emphasised the potential ‘what if’ of terrorist activity (Elmer and Opel 2011). The normalisation of surveillance following 7/7 and 9/11 may well have driven the enhanced integration of surveillance technologies and an escalating attention towards the ‘othering’ of a minority population against a normalised majority. Such key global moments, however, articulate with more ‘local’ concerns—such as the England Riots of 2011, the abduction of Madeline McCann, the James Bulger murder, and the popularity of reality television such as *Big Brother*—and form the contemporary surveillance milieu in the UK.<sup>2</sup> Further, it could be argued, hosting a mega-event such as the Olympic Games—with attendant securitisation and the *de rigueur* ring of steel—served to reinforce the normalisation of surveillance. We argue these processes were reinforced through the spaces of consumption and mediated messages perpetuated during the Summer Olympics in London 2012. Hence, through an examination of London 2012 in relation to the contemporary state of unease and heightened sense of emergency concerning public and national security (Bigo 2006, 2011), we explore how such mega-events—or what we prefer to call the sporting spectacle (see Silk 2012)—operate to implement, but more importantly legitimise, surveillance practices and security measures that inevitably form an unquestioned element of the urban landscape, to produce a tangible, yet troubling, *legacy* that can be experienced by those subjected to such forms of social control.

Within this paper we explore the evolving methods of ‘hard’ social control implemented within the context of the commercial and urban development surrounding London 2012 (hard) and ‘soft’ control through the images and messages perpetuated throughout the opening ceremony under the guise of a post-panoptic lens. To do so, we draw upon Bigo’s (2006, 2011) ban-opticon *dispositif*, a transversal apparatus that seeks to understand the contemporary age of surveillance under the aegis of suspicion and within the current climate of fear. This process of surveillance that enacts control, and the assertion of sovereignty, via the exclusion of minority populations or those who are deemed ‘unwelcome’ (Bigo 2006: 35) and the normalisation of an ‘accepted’ majority. We aim to explicate how, through Bigo’s (2006) conceptualisation of the ban-opticon, the mediated rhetoric and the consequent (re)fashioning of urban space, London 2012 operated as a site of social control representative of an ‘invasive practice of politicizing the most intimate forms of information exchange’ (Vetter 2012: 19). This is crucial to our understanding of London 2012, for we are outlining an assemblage of control functions that *moves beyond just the reformulation of architectural space*; speaking instead to how seemingly banal and affective mediated celebrations—such as the Olympic opening ceremony—are indeed heavily politicised and highly surveillant—albeit ‘soft’—forms of information exchange. That is, by including the spatial (re)workings of London’s urban cityscape and the carefully constructed rhetoric, disingenuous communication and selected images of ‘Britishness’ that contribute towards the ‘othering’ of a minority population, we draw upon the hard forms of surveillant practices and the expansive modes of ‘soft’ surveillance that have emerged as pervasive and shifting forms of social control (Marx 2006b). Such considerations are examined through an exploration of: the dominant and competing (re-)positioning of place through spectacle; the attendant complexities and cultural politics of class, race, gender contained within *the city/nation*; the mediated ‘logics’ of regeneration and historical progress, competing identities and subject formations; and, the securitisation and governance of space (and bodies therein) under the rubrics of neoliberal and neoconservative political and economic rationalities.

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a quest for *the* core national values. The fact that three of the four suicide-bombers were young, middle-class, British citizens intensified media and political commentaries (from all points of the spectrum) surrounding security, national identity, and multiculturalism (see Falcous and Silk 2010).

<sup>2</sup> We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers whose comments aided us to further develop our argument. This is perhaps especially the case relational to interconnectedness between global drivers (such as 9/11 and 7/7) and their articulation with more ‘local’ contexts.

## Surveillant, Technological and Securitised Orientations

Within Foucault's (1979) *Discipline and Punish*, the panoptic metaphor, adapted from Bentham's architectural design, has provided the theoretical basis for the exploration of surveillance practices in a myriad of social settings. More recently, a number of authors have begun to examine the limitations of Foucault's conceptualisation and application of surveillance, with the emergence of post-panoptic concepts that seek to challenge and extend our understanding of surveillance and social control (e.g. Andrejevic 2005; Bigo 2006; Haggerty 2011; Haggerty and Ericson 2000; Latour 2005; Mathiesen 1997; Poster 1990). These recent examinations of surveillance have pursued the notion of an interconnected and decentralised mode of observation and control. Latour's (2005: 181) 'oligopticon', for example, demonstrates a dispersed mode of surveillance that opposes the Panopticon, as separate surveillance sites, or oligoptica, 'see much *too little* to feed the megalomania of the inspector or the paranoia of the inspected, but what they see, they *see it well*' (cf. Mathiesen's [1997] concept of synopticism). Such contemporary analyses of surveillance and the evolution in technological methods of observation and control have emphasised the liquidity or fluidity that characterises contemporary society. Framed within Bauman's (2000) portrayal of 'liquid' modernity, the course of surveillance practices has evolved. As opposed to viewing surveillance as a fixed concept, a more contextual manner urges a consideration of the developmental and progressive dimensions of surveillance and social control measures, to question how they may be implemented, contested and viewed as an '*orientation*' (Bauman and Lyon 2013: 2, our emphasis). With Bauman and Lyon (2013)—whose book, *Liquid Surveillance*, we have drawn upon in the title of this paper—we theorise practices of surveillance in light of shifting and context-specific cultural trends (Gad and Lauritsen 2009; Monahan 2011).

The development of biometric (Mattelart 2010) and genomic (Lyon 2007) technologies suggests a surveillance age that facilitates the ability to observe, identify, extract and categorise individuals into specific populations through an increasingly automated process (Gandy 2007). Haggerty and Ericson's (2000) 'surveillant assemblage' depicts a flattening of the surveillance hierarchy, a rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) expansion of observation sites that accentuate the interconnectedness of monitoring and computer devices, or human points of contact, capturing and recording the many components that comprise the human body. Through the acquisition and dissemination of data via 'discrete flows', the individual is relocated in a multitude of contexts represented as a 'data double' (Haggerty and Ericson 2000). This rise of electronic and digitised modes of surveillance (Lyon 1994; Lyon 2003; Marx 1988, 2006a) has allowed for the collation of information through a vast expanse of online networks, facilitating the formation of digital personas and the monitoring of 'digital shadows' (Agre 1994; Clarke 1994). These automated processes enhance the ability to control specific populations as surveillance becomes more mobile, dispersed, interconnected and can transcend the borders and boundaries of fixed geographical or institutional spaces (Graham and Wood 2007; Latour 2005; Poster 1990).<sup>3</sup>

However, we aim to demonstrate a somewhat different comprehension of the ways individuals are identified and categorised into specific populations through the mediatisation of London 2012. In this sense, we rework Agre (1994) to argue that *digital shadows* were contained within the discursive Olympic rhetoric, which produced an understanding of those not deemed to fully belong to a post-9/11 British

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<sup>3</sup> Mann et al. (2003) explicate how the reclaiming of surveillance technologies can, at least momentarily, allow citizens to invert the gaze of traditional authoritative regimes of control, a concept that is demonstrated by the practice of counter-surveillance whereby, 'activists resist surveillance (or other forms of coercive state power) by deploying their own surveillance regimes' (Koskela 2011: 273). Through the use of wearable computing, such sousveillance can create a sense of emancipation as it allows the individual to utilise technologies of control to project a mode of surveillance back onto the watching authorities, as Mann et al. (2003: 347) indicate: 'the social aspect of self-empowerment suggests that sousveillance is an act of liberation, of staking out public territory, and a levelling of the surveillance playing field' (cf. Wilson and Serisier 2010).

citizenry<sup>4</sup> and simultaneously legitimised their increased surveillant control. Indeed, with the (renewed) emphasis upon a heightened awareness of hostile threats, increased securitisation has become a permanent part of the contemporary urban landscape that dictates national and international security interests. However, the effectiveness of such measures is becoming increasingly difficult to identify (Elmer and Opel 2011). The terrorist activity of 9/11 facilitated the development of enhanced methods of electronic surveillance and data capture, primarily surrounding airport security, which has ‘delocalised’ borders and increased the mobility and dissemination of data under the premise of a globalised system of surveillance (Lyon 2003). The consequences of implementing such surveillance technologies reinforces social divisions within civic space, by distinguishing between the individual who may be categorised as either ‘safe’ or ‘unsafe’ and legitimising suspicion of the non-acquiescent localised other (Lyon 2007). The integration of such divisive rhetoric is not solely restricted to the use of advanced technologies and can be witnessed through the mediated messages perpetuated by palatable and accepted commodity forms. Here the sporting spectacle is a powerful, political, public, and extremely popular mnemonic that we argue can serve as an economy of affect through which power, privilege, politics, and position are (re)produced (e.g. Silk 2012) and through which those bodies deemed abject are named, made visible and subject to measures of surveillant control. We argue that sporting spectacles are emblematic global events that offer a particularly lustrous — if somewhat insidious — space for the assertion, mobilisation, appropriation and reproduction of dominant power relations. They offer an emblematic laboratory for addressing important questions related to:

the complex strategies of cultural identification, belonging and discursive address that function in the name of ‘the people’ or ‘the nation’ and make them immanent subjects and objects of a range of social and literary narratives.

(Bhabha 1990: 292)

Put simply, sporting spectacle is a central device in the control mechanisms inherent in social institutions and in the ‘growing culture/spectacle of fear and surveillance’ (Silk 2012: 46) that encapsulates the current climate of urban securitisation. In this regard, the sporting spectacle is fully bound with surveillance practices and new modes of technology that become infiltrated into processes of social control (Mattelart 2010), involving the accentuation and application of militarised systems of monitoring and observation of domestic populations (Wall and Monahan 2011).

The interrelationship between surveillance, mediation, the global sporting spectacle, and the concomitant management, control and governance of *selected* bodies, citizens and civil liberties, reflects Bigo’s (2006, 2011) conceptualisation of the ban-opticon. Bigo (2011: 47) suggests that surveillance post-9/11 has been ‘established in relation to a state of unease’ (Bigo 2011: 47) through the proliferation of a global insecurity based upon the perceived or actual threat of terror attacks. The ban-opticon accentuates the requirement for a globalised approach to security and the control and management of specific populations. He suggests that discourses of (in)security and the management of unease have become organised transnationally through an array of networked bureaucratic organisations implemented to identify and specify ‘significant others’, and thus manage the prevailing, and somewhat insidious, undertone of fear propagated through a perpetual state of emergency (Bigo 2002). Bigo’s conceptualisation of contemporary surveillance places emphasis upon the ‘management of unease’ (Bigo 2006: 6) and the establishment of an interconnected global assemblage of defence and internal security that determines both who and what *must be surveilled*.

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<sup>4</sup> Here we attempt to reconceptualise the concept of ‘digital shadows’ (Agre 1994; Clarke 1994) by introducing the notion that digital messages conveyed through media outlets during the opening ceremony of London 2012 provided a carefully constructed vision, or ‘digital imprint’, of national identity that legitimates the normalised majority from the clearly delineated, and somewhat dangerous, ‘other’.



We explicate this assemblage within a sporting spectacle that is framed by a coalescence of global interest groups and power blocs including sporting, state, supra-national, corporate, philanthropic, and military organisations. This power bloc operates with a collective affinity with ideas of nationalism by redefining the place and its citizenry, by demonising and pathologising the abject in line with the logics of the market that favour increased social control of the city/nation and its subjects within a globalised frame of terror, fear and insecurity. To unpack this assemblage, and following Bauman and Lyon's (2013) call for a contextualised approach to Surveillance Studies, we explore the motivations or ideologies that frame the imposition and legitimisation of certain methods of surveillance and social control. In so doing, we focus on 'older methods, borrowed from the former societies of sovereignty ... but with the necessary modifications' (Deleuze 1992: 7) that are bound with discourses of unease and fear, managed by an assemblage of western political bureaucratic and military-industrial organisations adopting the 'logics' of the market. Such political-corporate-militaristic 'logics' of sovereign control promote the accelerated deployment and legitimisation of surveillance technologies through rhetorics surrounding the heightened awareness of terror attacks and the propagation of unease that becomes embedded within the public consciousness (Bigo 2006, 2011). Thus, Bigo's ban-optic metaphor reveals the heightened sense of unease and insecurity in the contemporary age of suspicion (Bigo 2006, 2011). Through this logic, we explore the prevailing social, cultural and material discourses that enveloped the geographies of the capital city/nation in London 2012, and the role of selective mediated celebrations of legitimate bodies and citizens in reinforcing and enhancing the surveillance of those who are pathologised as undesirable. These articulations of the sporting spectacle and the increasing normalisation of automated regimes of observation, surveillance and hard and soft social control are significant legacies of London 2012 that permeate the wider realms of English public consciousness.

### **Securitising space: civil liberties, (the) capital, and surveillance**

Transformations in the dominant modes of economic (re)production and regulation (MacLeod et al. 2003) have advanced a new epoch in the material (re)formation of contemporary urban landscapes. The organisation and management of the contemporary city involves the reconstitution of select parcels of urban space into multifaceted environments designed to encourage consumption and capital accumulation (Boland 2010; Harvey 2001; Judd and Simpson 2003; MacLeod 2002). Hosting sporting mega-events has emerged as one of the most effective vehicles for the internal and external advancement of these material transformations through the (re)-imaging and (re)-organisation of spectacular urban space and the attraction of mobile capital through inter-urban competition and entrepreneurialism.

Under the aegis of neoliberal economic and political rationalities and market-led approaches to housing regeneration, London 2012 acted as de facto shorthand for inward investment, consumption and corporatism predicted on assumptions that British urban social ills are found primarily in working class districts and council estates (Paton et al. 2012). The Games were part of a larger process through which capitalism remakes the totality of space in its own setting, regulated by the imperatives of consumption in which the building of frenzied temples of consumption lead the city, literally, to the point of *consuming itself* (Debord 1967: 169). When visitors—or ticket holders—arrived at the Olympic Park, they were funnelled out of the new Stratford station onto the prescribed walkway through Westfield Stratford City. Travelling 'off-piste' was 'vigorously discouraged' and access routes were 'neurotically planned and policed' (Mieville 2012 in Gibbons and Wolff 2012). Indeed, so keen were organisers to ensure visitors did not stray from the sanitised and sterile temple of/to consumption, that a shimmering wall of titanium fish—the 'Stratford Shoal', designed by urban architects Studio Egret West to hide the existing entrance to Stratford high street—was erected to separate the rescrubbed from that pocket of Stratford not subject to material gentrification and thus not conducive to either the tourist gaze or global consumption. Patrolling this façade, an army of *responsible* volunteer 'gamesmakers' happily warned of the dangers of the 'native other' lurking behind the screen, suggesting visitors would be far more 'comfortable' on the prescribed routes. This strategy policed the 'boundary' between 'legitimate' London and the 'native other'

that remained tucked behind the giant façade, buffering neighbouring communities from the Olympic zone (Gibbons and Wolff 2012). Not only does such rhetoric position the ticketed majority as ‘belonging without question ... with a more secure sense of identity’ (Skey 2010: 730), it also provides an understanding of the position of minority communities within new spatial hierarchies of belonging that replay aspects of colonial racism. Thus, the ‘black, Asian and Bengali presence is tolerated as long as it does not challenge the terms of the hierarchy itself’ (Back et al. 2012: 140). To further mark the distinction between the valorised spaces of consumption, the welcoming of the ticketed visitor and pathologised extant communities, Westfield Stratford City was simply closed to anyone other than Olympic ticket holders on busy Games days (Hall 2012). Similar to the gated communities of suburban white middle-class America, the architectural dominance of London 2012 exemplified the social splitting of resident communities through the purification of space, by discouraging interaction between visitors and the identifiable local ‘other’. This was reinforced by the dystopian image of municipal life saturated with references to terrorist threats and exemplifying the call for an enhanced civic militancy (Low 2009).

These strategies formed part of the process that attempted to ‘tame London’ (Gibbons and Wolff 2012: 442), spatially blockading a specific pocket of London that hitherto did not form part of a sparkling global neoliberal metropolis. This material refashioning of place utilised gentrification *as governance*. Following Paton et al. (2012), these spaces of post-Olympic consumption acted to identify, make visible and subject those deemed as unruly populations to further surveillance and control in ‘problem’ places. At the same time, spatial displacement, disadvantage and exclusion was further enhanced as ‘problem’ populations were invited to participate in consumer citizenship and the gentrification process. However, this was something of an ‘empty’ invitation given it is contingent upon having the means for achievement based on ‘consumption and ergo people’s material propensity to consume’ (Paton et al. 2012: 1471; Uitermark et al. 2007). Within a festival space, high-end rents, luxury apartments, Ikea and Tesco ‘towns’<sup>5</sup> dominate as post-Olympic spatial legacies. Such processes contribute to a social and cultural urban apartheid through spatially concentrated regenerative investment characterised by selective belonging, displacement, urban neglect and the disrepair of built environments, ‘rights to citizenship’ through participation or exclusion from collective human experiences.<sup>6</sup> The uneasy juxtaposition between those served by ‘capital space’ (Harvey 2001) and those either servile to, or shunned by, its over-determining consumerist logics, suggests that London 2012 contributed to on-going processes through which urban populations, spaces, and national citizenship became bifurcated in ‘scary cities’ (England and Simon 2010; Kern 2010), comprising the generatively affluent—both native to London and transient populations—and the degenerative poor; the private consumer and the public recipient; the civic stimulant and the civic detriment; the socially valorised and the socially pathologised (see also Davidson and Wyly 2012; Graham 2012).

The material and symbolic representation of place—underpinned by the market-led ‘logics’ of spectacle—projected the city and indeed its homogenous (if undefined) populous as a harmonious, diverse and plural space and citizenry of opportunity devoid of contemporary antagonisms (Davidson and Wyly 2012). However, representing London as a space of elective belonging performs a terrifying and fetishistic politics. As Whittaker (2011) argues, this fantastical geographical utopia is one that is only *sustained* by the exploitation of migrant bodies who nurture the creative class and the tourist image. London is both a site of opportunity and a site of social exclusion; ‘a dirty and a pretty city’ (Whittaker 2011: 125). In this sense, it simultaneously generates a double imaginary: a harmonious heterogeneous realm of opportunity and a hidden ‘reality’ of inequality that has been integral to the growth of London as a world-city: a

<sup>5</sup> Here we refer to the purchase of large pockets of land, neighbouring the Olympic Park, by Inter Ikea (who plan to build a village of Ikea housing, a ‘new Covent Garden in the East End’ [Bennett 2010]) and Tesco (the development of a supermarket suburb).

<sup>6</sup> A fuller account of the geographies of exclusion at London 2012 is explored in more detail in Silk (under review a).

narcissistic imagining of Britishness as generous, tolerant and hospitable through a ‘utopian geography’ that is ‘so powerful and all-encompassing that it ensures the very real processes of exploitation and social exclusion which sustain the vision remain out of sight’ (Whittaker 2011: 126).

Further, the re-imaging of place as a form of classed based regulation (see Paton et al. 2012; also Boland 2010), reveals the complexities and intersections of class and racial anxieties that are projected onto youth. Policing and governing the very presence of disposable populations in an increasingly gentrified urbanité, also weakens support for citizens rights, downgrades social services, speaks to an increasingly militarised popular culture, and a surveillance dominated cityscape (Giroux 2003, 2004). Indeed, race and racism are inextricably embedded in such neoliberal projects that have allowed for the development of new discourses that reinforce this ban-opticon by reconstructing immigrants and non-whites through common sense discourses (Roberts and Mahtani 2010) such as the sporting spectacle. As explicit expressions of race through sporting discourses are displaced from formal mechanisms and regulation of government rule, these material social forces are manifest in both official and informal (popular and corporatised) domains, without being explicitly named. They reveal how race and racisms are embedded within particular public, private and corporatised structures, which are more ambivalent, ambiguous and difficult to identify (Goldberg 2008). In this sense, race is discursively produced in the material and symbolic landscapes of London 2012. Following Nayak (2011), race is brought to life in time and space, concretised in place through the contested geographies of the London Olympics.

Susan Giroux (2010) argues these material sporting geographies carry a powerful, if symbolic, sadism. They materialise cruelly at key spectacular moments to impose order and control through the production of (demonised) subjects and provide the rhetorical conditions for the subsequent rationalisation of their ill-treatment, control and management. As Bigo (2002: 80) suggests, in such processes, the ‘other’ is demarcated by an ‘identity border’, a technique of managing fear that distinguishes the acceptable from the unacceptable, which is guided through the categorisation of those who present a potential risk to the public/private lives of citizens and the state. Here, the differentiation of the unwanted or threatening individual is predicated on the anticipation of risk and with reference to an invented criteria pertaining to characteristics closely associated with race and religion.

The anticipation of risk as it dovetails with race, religion, fear and the projection of a harmful ‘other’ was manifest beyond the material (re)invention of secure space for London 2012. In legitimating such neoliberal gentrification/governance processes, we suggest that the mediated representations of nation/national identity through London 2012 formed part of the surveillant assemblage. In the following section, we aim to reveal how these narratives formed part of a complex security assemblage that assembled and normalised a safe vision of multiculturalism and enhanced the distinction between the ‘high’ and ‘low’ risk individual (see Monahan 2011). To develop this argument, we turn to perhaps the most ‘popular’ space for the performance of conflicting and competing relationships between material transformations of place, contested signifiers of the national past, discourses of fear, regulation and security, and the attendant, mutual, constitution of bodies and place. Dominant narratives within the Opening Ceremony directed by Danny Boyle reveal how London 2012 delivered a utopic *national fantasy* (Berlant 1991) that further (dis-)connected selected bodies to the social and cultural geographies of place and legitimised Draconian security architectures under the global rubrics of terror, ‘othering’ and fear.<sup>7</sup>

### **‘Isles of Wonder’: The mythopeia of multi-ethnic Britain**

The performative segments of sporting spectacles have frequently been discussed as a potent space for conveying very particular or selected *narratives of nation* (Hall 1992) through viscerally affective and effective processes of subject formation (e.g. Hogan 2003; Silk 2012; Silk and Falcous 2005; Waitt 2000).

<sup>7</sup> A fuller ‘reading’ of the opening ceremony is discussed in Silk (under review b).



Directed by film director Danny Boyle—most known for his adaptations of *Trainspotting* and *Slumdog Millionaire*—the London 2012 Opening Ceremony, *Isles of Wonder*, was designed to address ‘where were we [Britain], where have we come from, what is the heritage, the historical, what are we now and where are we going; and on that journey what are the values that we hold up as being valuable?’ (Boyle 2012). In a context in which British national identities and anxieties over her significance and place within a post-colonial global order are historically fraught and uncertain (cf. Aughey 2010; Kumar 2010; Savage et al. 2010),<sup>8</sup> the content of *Isles of Wonder* was aligned with pre-existing games narratives embedded within bid documentation emphasising the global *advantages* of diversity, harmony and multiculturalism (see Falcous and Silk 2010). The ceremony offered a refashioning or resculpting of British national fantasies through a careful revision of the past. This (re-)positioned subjects in relation to complex issues and hierarchies of being and (be)longing within contemporary Britain. At their heart, such discourses raise important questions over the power to disseminate a selective image of the past through the distortion, disappearance, or staging, of the ‘authentic’ in the name of *capital* (Chhabra et al. 2003), and the commensurate fear, terror and legitimization of ‘security’ from the pathologised other.

The ceremony began with a prologue, a bucolic Britain, a (past) place centred on the *Wind in the Willows*, *Winnie the Pooh* and the countryside ‘we all believe existed once’ (LOCOG 2012). Quickly giving way to *Pandemonium*—a term invented by Milton as the name for the capital city of Hell in *Paradise Lost*—50 Isambard Kingdom Brunels oversaw the dismantling of the meadows and fields that were replaced by signifiers of the industrial age including vast smoking chimneys, steam engines and spinning jennys, culminating in the forging of the Olympic rings. As the scene progressed, Boyle contemplated the gendered, raced and classed ‘problems’ that arose in Britain during the industrial revolution and the ability of working people ‘through trade unionism and protest’ to locate Britain as the ‘workshop of the world’ (LOCOG 2012: 22). Such divisions were somewhat problematically given *closure* as historical artefacts, rather than part of the ‘present reality’ (Kane 2004) that was ‘solved’ through the abilities of working suffragettes, trade unionists, descendants of the *Windrush*, Pearly Kings and Queens, Chelsea pensioners and a squadron of Sgt. Pepper’s-era Beatles and inflatable yellow submarines. The emphasis on literary *fantasy* provided Boyle with an escape from Britain through parody and a means for negotiating changed conceptions of Britishness (Cecire 2009; Savage et al. 2010). Historical or future referents—such as the array of fantasy characters from children’s literature in the ceremony<sup>9</sup>—acted as ‘literary myths’ (Aldridge 1995 in Savage et al. 2010) that offered the means for viewers to negotiate with, and parody, the altered position of the UK in the broader European, post-imperial, global context (Savage et al. 2010). Indeed, the array of abject characters—such as the darkness of Voldermort from the Harry Potter novels—were the antithesis of the idealised Anglicised history and landscape within children’s literature. The gentle sterilisation/neutering of these dark fantasy characters by NHS nurses, squelched markers of difference that define both citizens and non-citizens with dangerous xenophobic connotations that reaffirmed the desirability of an exclusive, white and extant hegemonic form of traditional British power (cf. Cecire 2009; Pugh and Wallace 2006). Through Bigo’s (2006, 2011) ban-opticon and the appropriation of Bauman and Lyon’s (2013) reading of such surveillance philosophy, the mediated messages surrounding Boyle’s opening spectacle served to ‘fence in’ or confine an accepted notion of ‘ethnic Britain’, whilst simultaneously excluding, or ‘fencing out’, that which does not belong. Following Cecire (2009: 403), Boyle evoked a fantasy predicated on an idealised Britain which offered reassuring

<sup>8</sup> There is perhaps a certain irony with respect to which ‘global’ forces are involved in a transnational re-imagination of Britishness. Alongside, architectural and discursive influences from Ikea (Swedish) and Westfield (Australian), the official Olympic broadcaster who Boyle (from an Irish-Catholic background) worked with (often contentiously) to produce his Olympic spectacle was OBS, the Spanish based Olympic Host broadcaster. Consistent with earlier arguments (see e.g. Silk, Andrews and Cole 2005), transnational inflections of the local (in this case Britishness) often tend to be superficial caricatures of nation—mere ‘corporate nationalisms.’

<sup>9</sup> Voldermort (Harry Potter), Cruella de Vil (101 Dalmations), Captain Hook (Peter Pan), the Childcatcher (Chitty Chitty Bang Bang), the Queen of Hearts (Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland) were all vanquished by a fleet of Mary Poppins.

tropes of the past that confirm and celebrate ‘native’ Britishness. The ‘natural’ hierarchy of Boyle’s fantasy world was threatened but undisturbed by the demands of cosmopolitan mores, with intruders/undesirables identified and neatly controlled by ‘normal’ members of British society.

With the *common* mooring of bucolic Britain established, Boyle connected the past to a vision of the present/future where class, race and gender relations were presented as historical artefacts, and a ‘natural ethnic Britishness’ was normalised and ‘fenced-in’. This present/future paid respect to the founder of the world-wide-web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, and addressed the integration of technology into everyday life to further exclude, or ‘fence-out’, abject bodies. Set in an ‘ordinary house, the kind in which most British people live’ (LOCOG 2012: 30), the performance depicted the development of a teenage relationship between two protagonists, *Frankie and June*.<sup>10</sup> Boyle’s ‘ordinary household’ showcased a mixed-race family surrounded by 1,427 young volunteer dancers from a range of undefined racial and ethnic backgrounds.<sup>11</sup> Critical reaction from the ‘left’ heaped praise on:

Boyle’s impassioned poem of praise to the country he would most like to believe in. One that is tolerant, multicultural, fair and gay friendly and holds the principles of the welfare state stoutly at its heart.

(Higgins 2012)

For others, such as Adrian Burley, a Conservative Party Member of Parliament, it was ‘leftie multicultural crap’ (in Zirin 2012). The *Daily Mail* conflated the ‘crisis of the NHS’ with one of multiculturalism and immigration (see Walker 2012) and critiqued the segment for an inaccurate representation of ‘England’, as ‘almost, if not every, shot in the next sequence included an ethnic minority performer’. It also emphasised the unlikelihood that the organising committee would be able to ‘find an educated white middle-aged mother and black father living together with a happy family in such a set-up’.

Rather than a simplistic retraction to an essentialist core, *Frankie and June*, was emblematic of a ‘pride politics’ that asserted a mythic, inclusive ‘multiculturalist nationalism’ and tolerance which necessitated ‘interpellating “others” to be seen to speak out as proud subjects of multicultural [British]’ (Fortier 2005: 562). Indeed, within a climate of ‘unease’ and (in)security, this performative segment—when held together with the common histories that had been previously presented—expressly identified and specified ‘significant others’ as those interpellated within the ethnic core and those whom we should ‘remain fearful of’. In this regard, the performance straddled the tensions between a shared or imagined sentiment of be(long)ing together—a common language, cultural identity, ethnos—and the tensions, ambiguities and antagonisms of a multi-ethnic British society (e.g. Savage et al. 2010; Yousuf 2007).

These selective post-colonial imaginings, in stark contradistinction to the histories of the *Green and Pleasant Land* and *Pandemonium*, were represented without struggle or contestation, or indeed, without reference to colonisation or empire. In a context where the constitution of self and other has been defined in relation to colonisation and while certain racial categories are still discussed in terms of a ‘threat’ to the nation, this performance of ‘self’ is part of a wider opening of the categories of ‘Britishness’ (Skey 2010). Based on notions of ‘integration’, ‘respect for British values and way of life’ and the building of a single nation’ (Shadow Home Secretary David Davis 2005, in Yousuf 2007), the re-imagined idea of Britishness posits ‘shared values’ as opposed to ‘colour or unchangeable institutions’ as defining a contemporary civic identity (Gordon Brown 2005, in Yousuf 2007). Following 9/11 and 7/7, this fostered

<sup>10</sup> With McRobbie and Garber (1991 [1976]), the scene was underscored by consumptive and heterosexuality discourses in which the body becomes a site of both public and private investment and commoditised self-transformation).

<sup>11</sup> Frankie was played by Henrique ‘Cel’ Costa, a mixed-race immigrant from Portugal (who wore his hair in an African style cornrow style, and June by Jasmine Breinberg who is of mixed ethnic background from Deptford, South London. The ideological importance of her ‘black-hair’ was a hot topic trending on social media sites.

a new emphasis on integrating minorities into British values as part of an *exceptional* need to restrict ‘normal’ democratic expressions of difference by assimilation to *required* shared values (Kundnani 2012). Representations of harmonious, youthful multiculturalism and the provision of ‘ideal’ multicultural subjects within this production performed this neo-ethnic version of national identity in which “‘minority groups’ were not only to be let in, but also redefined as integral to the nation’ (Fortier 2005: 561). Represented as *legitimate* multicultural racialised subjects, they are given by Boyle—as auteur—an entitlement to belong to the national community and to speak in its name.

*Frankie and June* then is emblematic of the discourse of multiculturalism becoming marked by liberal themes such as secularism, individualism, gender equality, sexual freedom and freedom of expression (Kundnani 2012). Perhaps better put, the body politic of civic multiculturalism is marked by *perceived* forms of secularism, individualism, gender equality, sexual freedom and freedom of expression. Minority groups exemplified in *Frankie and June*, were not only ‘let in’, but also redefined as integral to the nation as exemplary embodiments of multicultural Britain. Critically, however, their role and everyday existence is contingent on toeing the line as ‘appropriate’ corporate, nationalist, conservative and gendered national subjects through being concretely grounded within a pre-told narrative (the *common* ground) of bucolic and Industrial Britain, the ‘closure’ of protest and *problems* brought about through cultural change, and the literal embodiment (through dance) and material manifestation of contemporary (post-1960s) British popular culture. Such attempts to create a ‘culturally neutral British identity based on the idea of political citizenship assume a *utopian abstraction of the nation*; in this imagined community of shared allegiance, “‘differences’ are transcended at the level of action’ (Yousuf 2007: 363, our emphasis), and any harsh realities of diversity are simply effaced. Any racist reaction—as seen in various columns and public blogs—simply becomes reinterpreted as the majority’s *natural* reaction to a minority’s rejection of its national values (Kundnani 2012). With Brown (2008, in Kundnani 2012), such fantasies of national purity literally screen out confrontation with structural inequalities. Spatial concentration, social injustices such as disproportionate levels of unemployment, cultural displacement health, poverty and drug abuse, feelings of disillusionment and resentment, ‘Islamophobia’, differential immigration statuses and the concomitant restrictions of rights, links between foreign and domestic policy (e.g. Modood 2007; Pitcher 2009; Rehman 2007; Stephens 2007; Vertovec 2007), and the sources of greatest conflict (e.g. religious difference, accentuated connotations of difference through the body such as heavily bearded young men or jilbab or niqab wearing women (e.g. Macdonald 2011)), deny both the dependency of the privileged on that structure and competing legitimating discourses. This reproduction of co-opted citizens (Kundnani 2012), which by its nature is predicated on the rejection of one’s extremist ideas, swearing loyalty to a defined set of national values and mythologies, tests of values acquisition, and erasure of one’s own experience and history in favour of the public celebration of national history, point to what McVeigh and Rolston (2009: 22) term ‘rituals of humiliation’ in the production of useful minority bodies, subjects and citizens in the performance of a post-colonial Britishness.

Moreover, an ‘aesthetic of selective silence’ (Kane 2004: 583) provided the platform to induce nostalgia and identification beyond our own selves while offering a powerful historical teleology. Multi-ethnic Britain was *given* no past: differential legitimating discourses, histories, belongings and identities were simply absent or silenced. The past and false commonalities in which Boyle’s multi-ethnic present were concretely grounded were the Anglicised, simple, stable, safe and pure discourses of the *Green and Pleasant Land* and *Pandemonium*. This utopic abstraction of nation, and the accompanying logics of assimilation to core British values, was supplemented by a lack of specificity in both the historical positioning of those represented (Macdonald 2011) and in the vagueness of the performative multi-ethnic corpus. As Zirin (2012) suggested they were ‘undefined black and brown bodies’. Thus, such performances provided acquiescence, celebrating a ‘safe’ multiculturalism, enabling integration where minority and especially religious pasts and presents, were turned into an arena of potential threat and simply silenced.

However, these ‘threats’ were by no means absent. The reconfiguring of surveillance in the post-9/11 and 7/7 moment around the management of terrorist activity, both in terms of the physical apparatus and the discursive constitution of selected pathologised others, rubbed against the sanitised multiculturalism alluded to above. In conjunction with the discourses of securitisation, terrorism and safety that dominated news stories in the lead up to the Games, and with a safe or sanitised multicultural present/future established, the media coverage of the Olympic opening ceremony also served as a powerful and insidious space in which to manage multiculturalism and the undertone of fear propagated through the post-9/11 / 7/77 perpetual state of emergency (Bigo 2002). Directly following *Frankie and June* was a segment entitled *Abide with Me*, a short dramatisation of the ‘struggle between life and death’ (LOCOG 2012). Beautifully sung by Emeli Sande and choreographed by Akram Khan (born in London to Bangladeshi parents) the hymn was integrated into the ceremony due to its ‘honest expression of the fear of approaching death [which] has made it popular with people of *all religions and none*’ (LOCOG 2012, our emphasis). This performance utilised powerful images of mortality, including the setting sun and dust. Yet, despite images of relatives of opening ceremony ticket holders (including Boyle) who had passed and were thus physically absent, being projected on the memorial wall, this was widely misinterpreted by the media and the public as a homage to the victims of the London bombings of 7/7. The media’s (re)presentation provided the narrative for British viewers of a wistful Second World War ‘glory’, a Manichean reassertion of *our* values and how *we* differ from others. Questions of belonging within this narrative morphed insidiously into questionings of loyalty, within a constructed dichotomy between commitment to undefined British values *or* Muslim values (Macdonald 2011).<sup>12</sup> These slippages and the seemingly ‘natural’ articulation of the melancholic performance by Khan with discourses of terror, threat and loyalty, speaks to a far wider demonisation, and indeed homogenising, of British Muslims (see e.g. Gillespie 2007; Kundnani 2012; Macdonald 2011; Meer and Modood 2009; Murthy 2007; Skey 2010). Thus, within a context of the Blitz narrative, of 7/7, and the agrarian and industrial economies, *Frankie and June* celebrated *our* apparent ‘tolerance’ and *our* apparently unproblematic diversity and inclusivity that is contingent upon a conformity to an ‘appropriate’ and ‘legitimate’ British way of life. The corollary is fear, unease and the legitimisation of managing both inclusive and exclusionary discourses. In this sense, the London Games offered insight into the hierarchies of belonging (Back et al. 2012; Macdonald 2011) and surveillance within this particular conjunctural moment in Britain. It was not so much the presence of the other, as the emphasis was on the necessity of the other to the functioning of dominant forms of life, that created tension and unease, but rather how that ‘otherness’ is kept in place or controlled (Skey 2010). Those who do not get to play a role in defining ‘our way of life’ and who are not deemed to be *properly British* (Stephens 2007) are thus perceived to be, and made to feel, more or less national than others given that they do or don’t embody sanctified and valued social and physical cultural styles that constitute national capital (Hage 1998 in Skey 2010).<sup>13</sup>

Anchoring relations between ‘them’ and ‘us’, the Games provided powerful, concrete and historically entrenched signifiers that made it clear who controlled the process of boundary maintenance, and defined the conditions of belonging, that which ethnic minorities *unconditionally belonging* to, as the *rightful managers* of nation (Skey 2010: 728). In this sense, and in the ‘recovery of national greatness *in the*

<sup>12</sup> Along with NBC (who controversially cut the segment from their broadcast), the BBC’s Hazel Irvine similarly misinterpreted the performance as such: ‘The excitement of that moment in Singapore 7 years ago when London won the Games was tempered with great sorrow the very next day with events on the 7<sup>th</sup> July that year. Moving wall of memory remembering those who are no longer here to share in this wonderful event. This is a calming and reflective pause after the exuberance’. Irvine was continuing the narrative set earlier in the BBC’s Opening ceremony countdown show, in which Andrew Marr gave a potted history of London that focussed on the Blitz and 7/7: conflating the reactions to both, he suggested these moments were, a la Gilroy (2004), models of commonality, of Britishness at its best, to which people should aspire: the dominant trope through which to understand contemporary national ‘struggle’.

<sup>13</sup> With Savage (2010), there was a sheer invisibility of cultural referents in Boyle’s British imagination from vast areas of the world, specifically China and Asia in general, Africa and South America and Eastern Europe.



*imagination*' (Gilroy 1992: 53) through the Olympics, racism, class antagonisms and gender politics is rendered dead. Yet the echoes of colonial racism are at play in the 'limit points of multiculturalism' that filters and orders immigration, identities and minorities in Britain (Back et al. 2012). This paints an all too familiar, and highly troublesome, picture of post-Olympic British 'neo-imperial hierarchies of belonging that corrode the quality of our social interactions and the possibility of humanity' (Back et al. 2012: 151). These hierarchies only serve to legitimate the global apparatus and practice of security, risk, surveillance and pathologisation of the 'non-compliant' *other* within nation states (Bigo 2006; Chan 2007, 2008).

## Concluding Thoughts

We have positioned London 2012 as part of the global apparatus that manages, contains and controls minority populations by justifying restrictions on the movement of those deemed as a 'potential threat' to the security of nation states. Our intent, following Bauman and Lyon (2013), has been to demonstrate the liquidity of London 2012, by suggesting the event catalysed fluid forms of soft and hard surveillance—a surveillant assemblage that *oriented* the public towards an *acceptable* and *normalised* architecture and population. Through a mediated mode of 'soft surveillance', the Games provided a stage upon which accepted forms of ethnicity could be played out, further distinguishing and stigmatising the suspicious, undesirable, or 'dirty' (Patel 2012) body. Fully cognisant with an immigration policy centred on a rhetoric of hospitality and tolerance, which welcomes some but expels others, the dominant material transformations and discursive constructions weaved into the fabric of London 2012 contributed to the production of a permanent state of anxiety. This state is dominated by a localised global 'threat' and constant references to 'terror talk' that serve to further justify and normalise the escalating use of surveillance and social control (Graham 2006; Giulianotti and Klauser 2010). In fact, the Games offered an insidious space in which the:

*surveillance of everyone is not on the current agenda but that the surveillance of a small number of people, who are trapped into the imperative of mobility while the majority is normalized, is definitely the main tendency of the policing of the global age.*

(Bigo 2006: 35, our emphasis)

In this sense, London 2012 was part of a delocalised, decentralised and omnipresent approach towards disciplinary surveillance, allowing for the normalised exclusion of specific individuals, groups and organisations perceived as a danger to (trans)national security. Further, through sustaining a post-9/11 and post-7/7 narrative of unease and fear, local media coverage was able to provide legitimisation for security measures that seek to monitor and control a *targeted population* deemed irrelevant to the multi-ethnic national fantasy of London 2012, which pursues and observes the movements of an increasingly transnational, yet localised, threat. The management of fear targeting those in the urban periphery, or the significances of the jilbab or niqab, is utilised to instigate methods of surveillance and securitisation through the 'safe' and sanitised enclaves of urban gentrification, while accelerating the collation of databases for government agencies to enhance administrative efficiency and promote the segregation of the normalised majority from the 'abnormal', or those identified as 'undesirable' (Bigo 2006).

The consequences of such actions enable nation states to effectively manage a population whilst simultaneously, but rather surreptitiously, impinging upon the civil liberties and privacy of those who are perceived to be 'innocent' citizens (Ball 2006; Lyon 2007). That is, such material and discursive actions serve to 'justify' authoritarian modes of control sustained through urban geographies of fear (see England and Simon 2010), suspicion, draconian forms of policing and scrutiny, the suspension of rights, and the promotion of an atmosphere of perpetual emergence and panic (Back et al. 2012) in 'actually existing spaces of neoliberalism' (Brenner and Theodore 2002). This may well be our post-Olympic reality: the 'legacies' and longer term liberty-costs (Raco 2012) of hosting the Games may well resemble lockdown London (Graham 2012) as opposed to Landmark London, where a range of new punitive measures and



potentially invasive laws legitimise the use of force, new surveillance technologies, methods of dealing with protest, and joint army, municipal and private security action become ‘normalised’ (Gibbons and Wolff 2012: 441). This brings with it a quiet accretion of restriction that will likely have a harsher and longer lasting legacy on minorities and the poor, involving a massive police presence for Black and Asian youth in the surrounding communities, new policing techniques such as stop and search, the further stigmatisation of working-class communities in policy discourse, and the familiar security architecture of airports and international borders characterised by scanners, checkpoints, ID cards, cordons, security zones that have been rolled out in the heart of the city (Gibbons and Wolff 2012; Graham 2012; Lindsay 2013; Paton et al. 2012). These new geographies of fear may well serve to maintain the fluid boundaries between deviance, belonging, order and disorder, that are instrumental to the ways in which cities are planned, built, lived, experienced (England and Simon 2010), and most crucially *controlled*. Poor and minority multi-ethnic bodies who border the space of the post-Olympic Park, and who are simply excluded through a range of discursive and material techniques from these spaces and the Ikea and Tesco towns which rub against it, are likely to be identified as a ‘threat’ or an unwanted ‘other’ subject to increased regulation, surveillance, policing, displacement or ‘civilising’ (Bosworth and Guild 2008; Gibbons and Wolff 2012; Mottin 2012; Paton et al. 2012). London 2012 operated as a method of governance that insisted upon, ‘the success of the differentiation between a normalized population which is pleased to be monitored “against danger” and an “alienation” of some groups of people considered as dangerous “others”’ (Bigo 2011 :63).

Following Kern (2010), such an institutionalised culture of fear is integral to the success and legitimisation of revanchist (see Smith 1998) urban gentrification: ‘fear of the other *justifies* displacement and redevelopment’ (Kern 2010: 210, our emphasis) that can be further mitigated through ‘private security, rationalized through the potential for wealth accumulation, and even commodified as desirable qualities of urban regeneration’ (Kern 2010: 225). The very notion of unease and potential threat from terrorist attacks has contributed towards an increase in the demand for surveillance by those who feel increasingly more at risk (Haggerty and Gazso 2005). This is perhaps especially the case for the ‘ticketed visitors’ who were welcomed into the secure, surveilled and commoditised space of the Games, and the majority middle-class populations moving into the scrubbed spaces of gentrification, perhaps even more so, for those white middle-class females positioned as most ‘at threat’ (see Kern 2010), who are routinely targeted in the promotional campaigns for such sanitised spaces. London 2012 can thus be read as part of an attempt to ‘reproduce and secure politically qualified life of the *polis*’ (Vaughan-Williams 2007: 186), underpinned by an assumption that terror is certain to strike at any particular moment. Such material and discursive rhetoric temporally nullifies threat, reinforces the pre-emptive actions of the state, and accentuates the culture of surveillance and the perpetuation of fear as a normalised—if not expected—part of civic life that becomes integrated into the architectural and aesthetic composition of London’s cityscape (Vaughan-Williams 2007). Both the soft-surveillance embedded within the narratives of London 2012, and the culture of fear ingrained in the architectures of the Games, point to the attenuation of the poor/impooverished/‘other’, to the degree that they are denied the basic *human rights to exist* in public [spectacular] space (Rose 2000).

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